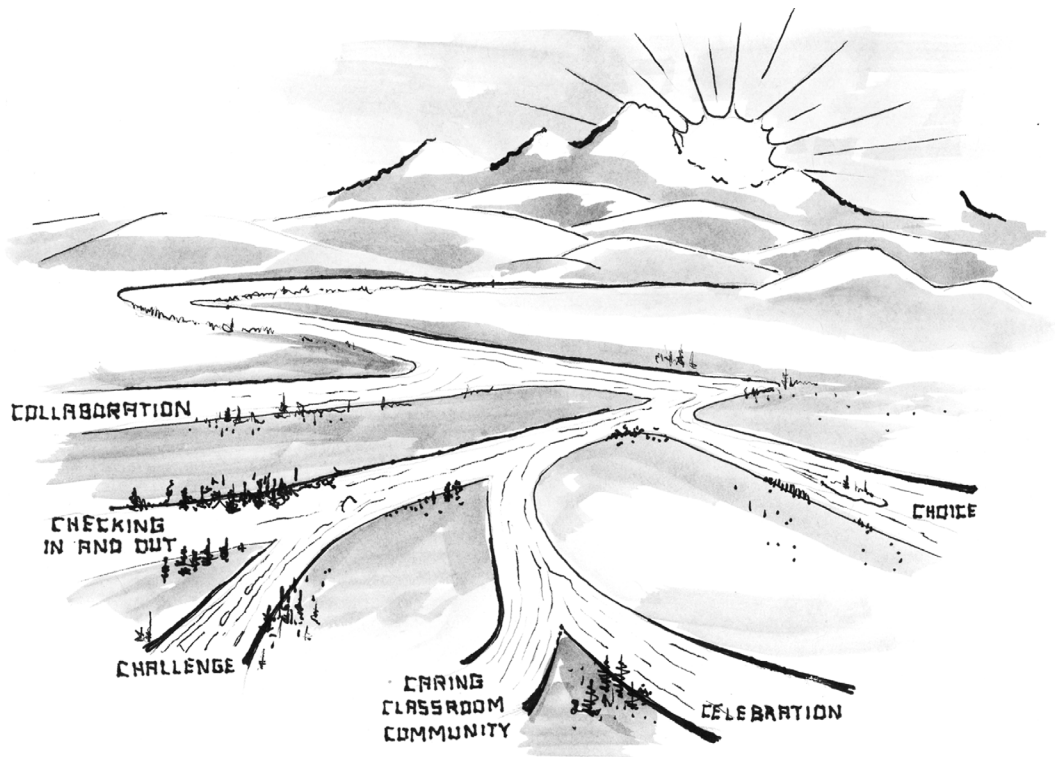




Clock Watchers



Artwork by Shaun Armour

Clock Watchers

*Six Steps to Motivating and Engaging
Disengaged Students Across Content Areas*

Stevi Quate
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Do We Have Time for Motivation and Engagement?

Stevi's Story

Long before I walked into the classroom as a teacher, I was curious about motivation. Perhaps it's because as a high school student, I lacked motivation to do the academic tasks required of me but had a strong motivation to get good grades. Those grades were important, but doing the work wasn't. Even then I found it curious that as an avid reader (Beers 1998), I resisted whatever we were required to read and often resorted to CliffsNotes. Yet I had read books like *Treasure Island*, 1984, and *Brave New World* on my own. I had my book next to my bed that I read every night and most afternoons when school ended. An assigned novel, though, killed my interest.

It wasn't that way when I was younger. I remember being highly motivated to master cursive when I was the new student in a school where the students had been taught cursive the year before. I was motivated to master addition and pestered my father to give me long sets of numbers to add after I had finished my homework. I was motivated to learn about Nebraska history and devoured Willa Cather novels at an early age. I was motivated to write the short stories my fourth-grade teacher assigned us. I still recall rewriting one line of dialogue over and over so it would ring true. When that fourth-grade teacher praised my dream sequence that ended the story, I glowed with pride. (Years later, this praise made me a kind

critic as I read middle and high school writers end their stories with a similar version of “and then I woke up from the dream.”) Despite my strong motivation to learn in elementary school, in high school my motivation to learn was almost nil.

Little did I know that my history mirrored the research on motivation. The tendency is for motivation to decrease throughout the years (National Research Council 2004; Hidi and Harackiewicz 2000). The suspected reasons for this phenomenon are numerous. Text messaging and playing video games outshine hitting the books. A job with a paycheck at the end of the week beats a class with a grade at the end of the semester. Checking out the boy in the other room is more enticing than checking out amoebas.

As a young teacher, I knew that I wanted the kind of classroom that rebuked the research. I wanted a classroom where students would be motivated to learn, eager to jump into the books we’d discuss and to write thoughtful texts about interesting ideas. I wanted my students to feel my joy in learning that I had as an elementary student. So once I started teaching, I read everything about motivation I could get my hands on, and from that reading, I learned to drum up anticipatory sets like gangbusters, and I could get an energetic debate going over almost any topic. However, even though I could often get kids to nibble at the edges of the learning, I found it difficult to get students to sustain the interest. Only years later did I realize that motivation wasn’t enough.

Motivation was what enticed kids to begin the learning game. Dewey, in the early 1900s, talked about education as “catching” and “holding” students. I could catch them, but I couldn’t hold them. This tension of catching and holding students reminded me of my interest in birds. Just as I’m motivated to learn about birds, I’ll pick up books at the library and subscribe to *Audubon* magazine. The books catch my interest so that I’m willing to begin the game of getting to know birds. However, just like many of my students, those texts don’t hold me. Too often, I have a hard time sustaining my attention, and I’m easily pulled away by other interests.

I didn’t quite understand what was happening until I read Csikszentmihalyi’s ideas about flow (1990, 1997). Reading his description of that experience of getting lost in the activity at hand and the world disappearing because the activity itself consumes one’s attention and energy, I began to understand Dewey’s concept of holding students. I recalled my own times when I was in flow and recognized how I was held by the experience. I thought about the magical times I’d spent writing when writing worked. I didn’t want to stop, and when I did, I could hardly wait to return to it. I remember times when I was so engrossed in writing a story that I’d be thinking about my characters while driving, only to find that I had passed my exit miles before. Not a good plan for driving, but a great experience for the writer.

Reading has often been like that for me. It's easy to get into the flow and get lost in a book. Like many readers, I had experienced moments when I didn't hear someone call my name because I was lost in the story, or times when the characters became as real as my best friends. I knew flow as a reader and a writer. And I could recall numerous other times during nonschool activities when I was totally engaged in my learning: learning to ski when I was the first on the lifts as the sun was breaking over the mountaintops; training my dog as I attended class after class and worked hours on end watching Micky stop when I stopped and walk by my side on command; gardening as I tilled the soil and forgot about the papers that needed to be graded. Yes, I knew flow and I knew what it was like to be a learner who had been caught and held.

When I reflected on those times when I had entered into the state of flow, I realized that I had moved beyond motivation; motivation to learn to ski got me started but wasn't enough to sustain my interest. Engagement was what sustained me. As I lost track of time, I was consumed with knowing more, and I was having fun. Engagement in the activity held me.

That for me was the missing piece of my teaching. How could I motivate my students, and then what could I do to create the context that would engage them?

John's Story

I grew up in a family of seven: four boys, one girl, and two smart parents. My dad was a steelworker for Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation, and my mother was a housewife. Neither had completed a college education. They loved each of us deeply, but we knew that love of us as people did not always include love of our behavior. We had choices concerning our careers, but the challenge of higher education was nonnegotiable.

Every night our family collaborated around the dinner table. We debated religion, politics, and family matters but with clear norms concerning our language and treatment of each other. Mom and Dad constantly checked on our progress in the classroom, with our chores, and on our treatment of others. Long before I was an educator, I understood the importance of clear and measurable goals. If we did not meet them, we sat down with our parents and planned for success. My parents celebrated our lives. Our accomplishments were displayed on the icebox (yes, it was the '50s!). When we left home, our parents sent us cards, indicating how proud they were of our professional work and reminding us to treat our colleagues and family with love and respect. My parents knew how to motivate and engage their children in learning for life. Long before I read the research about motivation and engagement, I knew it because I had lived it.

School didn't operate in the same way, though. I attended an elementary school in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. As we sat in our desks on any given morning, an announcement would come on the intercom: "Boys and girls, you are about to hear what happens to students in this school who break the rules. The following rule has been broken." Many mornings we heard the specifics of an offense—tardiness, sassiness, laziness. We knew what was coming next: "Come here, young man." Then we would hear the whack, whack of a paddle meeting the backside of the offender. Cries of pain followed. Yet students continued to break rules and to fight in the halls. More paddling followed. Nothing changed. At an early age, I realized that threats and public punishment shaped the climate of the school but didn't promote excitement in learning.

In this same school, I learned the demoralization of tracking: we had the A class, the B class, and the C class of learners. The difference in how these students were treated was palpable and immoral. You could see it in the faces of the C group; they were sad and bored. Some of these low-tracked learners were motivated to break the rules or act out in anger towards the students from the A group. The A students knew at an early age they were bound for college; the C students knew at an early age they would be working in the steel mill. And years later, on reflecting back to these days, I recognized that most students do rise to the expectations of their teachers.

The lessons from these early years have stayed with me for the entire three decades that I have been in education. I remember hearing the tears of an offender over the intercom and then going home to a family dinner during which we discussed being kind to others. The contrast didn't escape me. In my teaching, I knew I would bring my parents' principles to the classroom, not the principles I learned at school. My parents didn't coerce me into learning; instead, they motivated me through love and high expectations, and they ensured I was engaged through invigorating conversations each night of my young life.

And that's what this book is about. It's about motivation and engagement and ways that we can create the contexts in our schools to heighten both motivation to catch students and engagement to hold them.

Why This Book at This Time? What's the Urgency?

As we work in schools, we see nearly every day why a book on this topic is urgently needed. Along with working as a consultant in various schools across Colorado, each of us is a site professor at two different large urban high schools in the Denver area. As site professors, we mentor teacher candidates and collabo-

rate with practicing teachers and administrators. The schools we work in, along with schools across the nation, face tremendous pressures for teachers to ensure students perform at unprecedented levels.

Because of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), teachers feel the power of the state assessment in shaping their instruction and their professional development, and even if NCLB were to disappear, our hunch is that the pressure to perform would remain. At both of our schools, we watch each year begin with teachers studying data from the previous year's state assessment. Even though administrators build in time for celebrations of growth, teachers focus on the dreary results. Remember, these are urban schools, and they're typical of schools with similar demographics. Often more than twenty percentage points below the state's average proficiency level, the results let teachers know the game they'll play again this year: raise test scores.

School leaders, instructional coaches, district curriculum specialists, and staff developers work long hours determining what teachers need to know in order to close what the newspapers label as the achievement gap. We have seen those solutions run the gamut, some great solutions and some highly questionable: eleven-sentence paragraphs to improve writing scores, a skill-and-drill program hated by both teachers and students as the mandated reading intervention program, standards-based education with the daily objective posted in each classroom, the take-five strategy for solving problems in math, professional learning communities with essential learnings and common assessments, learning walks to monitor teachers' implementation of specific practices, guided reading in all English classrooms at the expense of literature study, sustained silent reading throughout the building, and school uniforms. We've watched the upside and the downside of each of these efforts, and the common variable that we've seen often ignored is captured by the ubiquitous laments of teachers: How do I get the kids to care about their learning? How can I get them to do the work? How can I get them to come to class on time and to bring their books and paper and pens and agenda and homework? In other words, how can teachers motivate and engage their students? Rarely have we seen a school address these concerns, and rarely have we worked with a school where these concerns weren't present.

Ironically, in light of the pressure of NCLB, the issue of motivation and engagement is one that must be addressed. And here's the catch-22:

When teachers are stressed, they tend to be controlling and demanding with students, and they tend not to provide support and enthusiasm for the students. This has been shown to have a strongly negative effect on the students' motivation and performance. Students need an accepting, supportive, and nourishing context in which to learn, and teachers who are feeling negative emotions and are

not effective in managing them will not be able to supply the needed support to students. Teachers' enthusiasm about teaching has been shown to positively affect students' enthusiasm about learning. (Deci 2006)

Even if NCLB were to disappear, motivation and engagement are so deeply intertwined with substantive learning (Melzer and Hamman 2004) that we see a focus on motivation and engagement as an ethical imperative. Without a sharp focus on motivation and engagement, schools are unlikely to produce students who grow intellectually (NCREL 2005; Guthrie, Wigfield, and Perencevich 2004). A few years ago the National Research Council studied engagement in high schools. The impressive study begins with this statement:

Learning and succeeding in school requires active engagement—whether students are rich or poor, black, brown, or white. The core principles that underlie engagement are applicable to all students—whether they are in urban, suburban, or rural communities. (2004, 1)

The research shows that motivation and engagement matter in all contexts but in different ways. Students who live in poverty and attend schools where motivation and engagement are missing often leave school at an early age. The dropout rates are stunningly high. In contrast, students from more economically privileged settings can coast by even if they aren't engaged in their studies. Those students may learn less than their more engaged classmates, but they are likely to be given second chances and to graduate (National Research Council 2004). If graduating from high school matters, then motivation and engagement matter (Gewertz 2006), and if deep learning matters, then again motivation and engagement must move to the forefront of education conversations and actions.

When teachers talk about motivation and engagement, the anecdotal stories are often alarming:

"If I can't get a student to come to class, how can I get him to care?"

"You don't know our students."

"They simply don't care about their work and you can't get them motivated, no matter what."

And when researchers study high school students about their level of engagement, the results mirror these anecdotes. In 2004 and 2005, the *High School Survey of Student Engagement* (2005) was given to nearly 171,000 students in twenty-six states. Less than half the students said they did work that made them curious about learning, and less than a third were excited by their classes. If working hard is one element of engagement, then those students were far from engaged. More than half stated that they spent four or fewer hours a week on homework. Yet two-thirds of the students were earning mostly As and Bs.

This is not a recent phenomenon. In the mid-1980s, John Goodlad's (1984) classic study on high schools noted the large number of students who were staring out windows. In the early '90s, LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) were writing about students who were literal school dropouts and those who were still in school but who had "tuned out." Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) landmark research on boys and literacy also highlighted the boredom and disengagement that many of our male students feel. School literacy, for example, just doesn't connect. As poet Jimmy Santiago Baca said in an interview with Bill Moyers, "Reading don't fix no Chevys" (hence the title of the Smith and Wilhelm's book). Without recognizing how school is relevant to their lives, students aren't willing to be caught, let alone held.

What Does a Teacher Need to Know?

If you were to take a peek at the books that line the shelves of our bookcases, you would find a slew of books on motivation and engagement. Stevi might show you a cute flip book that lists activity after activity. John, on the other hand, might pull off his shelf one of several books that promise to give the teacher twenty-five or fifty or even one hundred activities *guaranteed* to motivate. Both of us can tell you stories of presentations we've gone to where presenters listed one tip or trick after another. But tips and tricks are not adequate for meaningful learning, and some that we've heard are just plain silly. Dressing as a historical character might work for teachers with flamboyant personalities, but this trick by itself won't produce the kind of learning that our students deserve. Even though they contain practical ideas that teachers love, these books and presentations simply aren't sufficient to help teachers consider and apply the research on motivation and engagement.

Our book suggests activities that we've seen work in classrooms, but all of the activities are grounded in a framework that is informed by research. This framework, which we call *the six Cs*, is what makes an instructional activity transcend the "tips and tricks" label. Each suggestion has the potential to shape the culture of the classroom, which teachers must intentionally nurture. Our framework provides a way of thinking that will guide planning, teaching, and reflecting on instruction and learning. This framework builds a classroom culture that is likely to produce student motivation and engagement that will result in learning.

Our framework emerges from the research on the psychology of motivation and engagement. Much of this research explores the mind of the student who wants to learn and who persists in doing difficult tasks. This research reminds us that motivated and engaged learners are curious, need to feel competent, and

must be convinced that they are in control (Guthrie and Wigfield 1997; Smith and Wilhelm 2006; Deci 2006).

The Six Cs: Creating a Context That Motivates Students and Nurtures Engagement

1. *Caring Classroom Community*

Middle schools are often depicted as places where the affective needs of the individual are more important than the academic needs. In contrast, high schools are often portrayed as large impersonal institutions (Goodlad 1984). However, the development of a nurturing classroom community in which students are known well by both the teacher and their classmates matters, whatever their age or grade level. For a teacher to be a “warm demander” (Gay 2000), she must intentionally build the culture of a classroom where students know they’re cared for and where they will be supported.

2. *Checking In and Checking Out*

Assessment is a hot topic in educational circles, but often the power of assessment isn’t realized. One teacher told us, “I can build those pretty charts from the data I’ve collected, but it won’t change a thing for my students.” We argue that assessment works better as a verb—as an action—rather than a noun. We’ve watched how teachers who earnestly check in with their students, provide feedback along the learning journey, and ensure that students are an active part of the check-in–checkout process motivate and engage.

3. *Choice*

One of the ways to put students in control of their learning—to build their sense of autonomy—is to ensure that they have voice in their learning. However, choice must be scaffolded and intentional.

4. *Collaboration*

Just as motivation theory informs us, relationships matter (Smith and Wilhelm 2006; Gewertz 2006). Students tend to be more motivated and are more likely to be engaged in their learning when they work within a supportive, collaborative

context. Students need to know what an effective learning community is and what is not effective.

► 5. Challenge

In Colorado, as elsewhere, the three Rs—*rigor*, *relationship*, and *relevance*—have become an educational mantra. We worry, though, about the use of rigor. We've seen rigor defined as tougher standards, increased homework, and reduced student support, and the results have been questionable. Yet we know the power of challenge; when designed appropriately, it is a motivator and an essential factor in engagement. We also know what happens when students aren't challenged appropriately: boredom or even apathy (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

► 6. Celebration

We need to celebrate moments of success, both academically as well as personally. Celebrations can come in many forms, from an end-of-unit coffeehouse event, to a whole-school assembly, to a note sent home to parents. These celebrations set students up for future successes.

Our framework sounds nice and tidy, but we know it's messy. Each strand of our framework is highly interwoven with the others. Just as in a spider's web, one weak strand affects the entire web. No one strand can be ignored, and yet all of them must be strengthened to create that classroom where students are caught and held.

Why Create a Context That Motivates Students and Nurtures Engagement?

► To Nurture Curiosity

Psychological studies didn't need to inform us that curiosity influences motivation. Common sense tells us this. Anytime we're curious about something, our interest is high, and we feel motivated to explore and learn. Motivational researchers talk about interest through two constructs: *individual interest* and *situational interest*. Individual interest describes a person's unique interest in a topic, an interest not necessarily connected to school. Situational interest refers to the role of the context in shaping a person's interest. When Stevi's son, Dean, was young, for instance, he was fascinated by butterflies and spent many a summer

day with his butterfly net in hand and identification manuals nearby. His individual interest had nothing to do with the classroom; instead, it was personal and might have been influenced by his grandfather, an entomologist. Dean's interest was spurred by his own curiosity and fueled by his growing knowledge. The more he knew, the more he wanted to know.

On the other hand, when Dean was in high school, he had a teacher who loved philosophy, and through masterful teaching, he stirred up the students so that they too were curious about philosophical issues and dilemmas. Because of this situational interest, where the teacher created the context that inspired curiosity, Dean pursued further studies in philosophy when he was in college.

The construct of situational interest provides hope that teachers can do something intentional to catch kids and then to hold them. We don't have to rely on students entering our class already interested in our content, and we can build our repertoire with strategies for tickling their interest. Of course, no teacher wants to bore students; instead, teachers want to nurture imagination, thrill the intellect, and move students to want more, just like Dean's philosophy teacher did. Teachers can build from a student's individual interest, but in the secondary school a focus on situational interest can be highly robust.

The impact of situational interest on motivation is exemplified in research by John Guthrie and Alan Wigfield (1997). They describe a remarkable teacher's kindling of interest by taking students to a hillside outside of school. There students observed insects and formed inquiry questions. After arousing student curiosity, the teacher nurtured their engagement in a rigorous study of insects by building from their questions and showing them how to conduct research that led to answers to their questions. This instructional design was intended to grow literate scientists.

Guthrie and Wigfield's research has informed the work of others. For instance, Perencevich and Taboado (2007), who have worked closely with Guthrie and Wigfield, show how "curiosity charts" motivate. The inquiry process as a way to engage students is detailed in Smith and Wilhelm's book *Going with the Flow* (2006).

One of our major contentions is that creating the context that will motivate students and nurture engagement is not only doable but critical. The way a teacher orchestrates her instruction can tease students into caring and can then build the pathway for sustaining interest. Our six Cs, when braided together, form that context.

► **To Respect Students' Need for Competency and Control**

As a teacher thinks about motivation and engagement, it's important to continue peeking into the heads of his students by noting what research tells us about the

concept of competency. Remember: the more we know about students' mental and emotional workings, the wiser we can be about our instructional decisions.

In his studies of what makes people happy with their lives, Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997) argues that people enter into a state of flow when they are confident that they have the requisite skills necessary to be competent in a given task. Near Stevi is a skateboard park where she's watched young people skate up unbelievable angles for hours on end. She's seen the young men (with an occasional female here and there) fall, scrape elbows, rip the skin off knees, and continue to do it again. One time she asked one of the skateboarders why. His answer: "Because I know I can do it." This skateboarder, like others engaged in challenges, had a strong sense of efficacy, convinced that he would eventually be successful. He was in control and worked hours on end to achieve a goal that he was certain he would attain. In contrast, Stevi asked her nephew why he didn't spend time at the skateboarding park. Randy's answer was simple: "I could never do that!"—and he didn't try. If students doubt their competency, they lose interest, divert attention from their limitations, or flee (Smith and Wilhelm 2006).

The question is: What can teachers do to support the need to feel competent? It's not a gift they can endow on students, but we argue that teachers can create a context that builds the sense of competence. Our framework develops from these notions of competency and control. We're honoring the need of students to feel competent, be autonomous, and be connected to others with similar values. Our focus is on what the teacher can do to nurture this sense of competence and control. It's about a way of thinking to build the kind of classroom that both teachers and students (and administrators and parents) want.

Of course, we're not talking about a silver bullet or about a quick fix. We're talking about building an intentional culture in a classroom and ideally in a school. To build and nurture such a culture takes time. The adolescent who walks into the middle or high school has had years of experiences that have led her to believe that she is or is not capable, that she is cared for or not by the adults in a building, and that she is or is not able to exert control over her academic journey. To change perceptions takes time, and to incorporate all pieces of the framework takes time for teachers.

As Fullan (1993) says, change is a journey, not a blueprint nor a destination. We see that changing the culture of a classroom and of a school is an important journey and one we hope schools will embark on.



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